

## **On Family and Reflection: Clive Sithole at Mid-Career**

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### **Abstract:**

The article features South African potter Clive Sithole. Topics covered include his integration of Southern African culture into his work, his work at the Bartel Artists' Trust Centre, and his first solo exhibition "Journey of a Herdboy" at Durban's African Art Centre in 2001 wherein he collected Zulu material culture in the form of headrests, milk vessels, and beadwork.

**Keywords:** Clive Sithole | ceramics | pottery | South African art

### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

On Family and Reflection

# CLIVE SITHOLE

at MID CAREER

by Elizabeth Perrill







**Opposite:** *Uphiso*, 2007, 18 in. (46 cm) in height. Sidney and Louis Eskenazi Museum of Art, Museum purchase with funds from the Class of 1949 Endowed Curatorship for the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, 2007.15. Photo: Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague, courtesy Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University Bloomington. **1** Magdalene Odundo, OBE and Clive Sithole, April 2005, Farnham, UK. Photo: Eugene Skeef. **2** Cattle figures, handbuilt, burnished, various dates. Photo: Bodil Deibjerg. **3** *Iphupho/The Dream*, Outdoor Public Art Initiative for eThekwin Municipality, 2014. Photo: Elizabeth Perrill.

The early years of Clive Sithole's life were spent in one of the most cosmopolitan areas of South Africa available to a black family in 1971. Born in Soweto to a jazz musician and a seamstress, he was surrounded by creativity, but also endured the repression of apartheid.<sup>1</sup> During a brief time when he was sent to connect with rural family in Lesotho, as a respite from the tensions of apartheid, Sithole was first exposed to ceramics. Herding cattle for his relatives and living in the mountainous kingdom of Lesotho provided him with the time and space to watch women make traditional ceramics and to himself mold clay figures of cattle alongside his peers. This pastime is a nostalgic remembrance for many Southern African men—politicians, business leaders, or teachers who were formerly herd-boys. Sithole, however, has nurtured his experiences and knowledge of Southern African culture into an integral part of a complex, contemporary artist's practice. In his narrative and iconography, he returns to the theme of cattle, both in figurative sculptures and as a decorative motif.

#### Influences and Traditions

Sithole imbues his work with a combination of urban savvy and rural influence, which conveys his passion and technical exper-

tise. While visiting Lesotho at the age of six, Sithole watched his relative Alina Masoetsu creating ceramics. At times, Masoetsu's influence and the traditions of Sotho and Venda ceramics make their way into Sithole's work in his use of graphite and red ochre. During Sithole's early years, this influence was complemented by a distinctive figure in the South African art world, Philemon Lerata. Lerata was one of the University of Natal's first black graduates in fine arts, a monumental achievement during apartheid.<sup>2</sup> Sithole apprenticed with Lerata in painting, drawing, and ceramics, and he speaks of this as one of his first true mentorship experiences.

As is the case for many ceramic artists, a range of studios and instructors shaped Sithole's career, but he also has an independent streak that has served him well. In 1997, he chose to live with his sister in Durban, South Africa, the largest urban center in the predominantly Zulu-speaking province of KwaZulu-Natal. The two siblings, originally from a set of triplets, one of whom passed away in infancy, were always close. This unique identity has inspired Sithole, and with the passing of his sister, he is the last remaining triplet. Sithole has recently been taking stock and has plans to complete several ongoing projects combining bronze and ceramics, numerologically complex reflections on his life as



a triplet. His ambitions include series of cattle, horns, and vessels that pay tribute to the career path his sister helped solidify over 20 years ago.

When Sithole moved to Durban, he started working at the Bartel Artists' Trust (BAT) Centre, where he would later maintain his ceramics studio for over a decade. Initially, his work was small in scale and he worked with Cara Walters, manager of a development workshop for youth, but he soon set his own path. Struck by the nearly spherical perfection of the blackened, burnished vessels of famous Zulu potter Nesta Nala, Sithole studied and emulated the historical beer wares of KwaZulu-Natal. Zulu hand-coiled wares are produced in a range of sizes, both with and without necks. While brewing vessels can be over two feet in diameter, the most common size fits comfortably between the shoulders of a person drinking or carrying *utshwala*, the beer served to guests and ancestors. Traditional vessels from a range of sources form a point of departure and resonance for Sithole's work.<sup>3</sup> He created hand-coiled, burnished vessels that expressed his love of Zulu cultural expression and history.

Setting a New Path

Sithole's first solo exhibition, "Journey of a Herdboy," was held at Durban's African Art Centre in 2001. He sought out and collected Zulu material culture in the form of headrests, milk vessels, and beadwork, as well as art from other African nations. This engagement with material culture can be seen in his lids that emulate headrests and the incorporation of abstracted geometric decorative motifs (8). Later, Sithole was mentored briefly by Nesta Nala, arguably the most famous Zulu potter of the 20th century. He continues to collaborate with her daughters Jabulile and Thembile, who have continued to improvise upon and build the legacy of the historically women's art form of Zulu beer vessels. Today in the Durban Art Gallery, the municipal collection of KwaZulu-Natal's most populous city, Sithole's work is displayed alongside Nesta Nala's, whose pieces are some of the first ceramics by a black South African woman to be displayed in a museum as artwork.

While keeping the traditional work of Zulu, Sotho, Venda, and other local traditions in mind, Sithole has worked to build







**4** Clive Sithole forming and refining greenware, Godsbanen, Aarhus, Denmark, November 24–25, 2018. *Photo: Bodil Deibjerg.* **5** Left to Right: Angeline Okoro, Grace Ugwoke, Uzor Amaka Ugwoke, and Clive Sithole, Umuoyo Esimba Nrobo, Enugu State, Nigeria, April 2005. *Photo: Eugene Skeef.* **6** Jabulile Nala and Clive Sithole (Thembele Nala not shown), ceramic demonstration. Isikhathi Sethu: Our Time workshop, Mudflat Studios, Somerville, Massachusetts, July 22, 2018. *Photo: Elizabeth Perrill.* **7** Various vessels, coil built, burnished. *Photo: Bodil Deibjerg.*

relationships that have allowed him to break into the urban art world. His time living at the workshop of ceramic artist Maggie Mikula and time at the University of KwaZulu-Natal working with professor Juliet Armstrong ensured he was connected to the South African art world, a scene that was historically dominated by white artists and difficult to navigate for black artists during the early post-apartheid years in the 1990s.

Sithole earned a post-graduate diploma at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2007, has been honored with many national awards, and has demonstrated at ceramic conferences and congresses throughout South Africa. He has also participated in and led workshops with rural potters in KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces of South Africa to learn from and share with both Zulu and Venda ceramic artists. Striking a balance between reaching into South African roots and fostering international collaborations, Sithole has also traveled widely.

#### A Growing Reputation

Over the past two decades, Sithole has become part of a growing network of artists, gallerists, critics, and historians who are shining a light on African and African diasporic dynamism in ceramics. Over a decade ago, Sithole traveled with Eugene Skeef,

a musician and cultural development advocate, to Nigeria, where he studied the Udu ceramic drum. Sithole visited the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham, England, and worked with Magdalene Odundo, who in turn has also traveled to KwaZulu-Natal. Sithole's love of coil building and burnishing, techniques integral to several indigenous South African traditions, resonate strongly with Odundo's work.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the selective use of oxidation and reduction atmospheres are an integral part of contemporary hand building in KwaZulu-Natal.

As Sithole's international and domestic reputation has expanded, he has also expanded the scale and media of his expression. From 2014 to 2015 Sithole produced two sculptural monuments, a more abstract public artwork created for the Durban beachfront and a figurative sculpture commemorating Cecilia Makiwane, South Africa's first registered professional black nurse. Sithole's 2014 beachfront monument was the first public sculpture to be commissioned by the Outdoor Public Art Initiative of eThekweni Municipality, the Durban governmental agency responsible for public beautification. Entitled *Iphupho/The Dream*, this installation reflects Sithole's typical ceramic explorations featuring abstracted headrests, objects closely related with ancestral protection and visions.





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8 Vessel, coil built, etched, burnished fired in an electric kiln, graphite and red ochre post-firing surface treatments, 2006. 9 Mottled pot, coil built, burnished, fired in an electric kiln, applied decoration, saggar-fire blackening, and etched surface treatments, 2007.

Sithole stresses the importance of remembering one's ancestral ties and inspirations. In 2018, he was part of workshops at Mudflat Studios in Somerville, Massachusetts, and at Godsbanen, a cultural center in Aarhus, Denmark. During these events, Sithole returned to the iconographic theme of cattle as a metaphor for wealth, valuing one's roots, and his identity as a man raised in a culture that reveres pastoralism who creates wares inspired by ceramics historically made by women. During the Mudflat Studios workshop co-led with Jabulile and Thembele Nala, Sithole stressed the subtlety of Zulu communication and his deep respect for women, both on a personal and a professional level. Alongside the Nala sisters, Susan Bernstein of Mudflat Studios, Michael Rossi of Rossi Films, and myself, Sithole worked to create the "Isikhathi Sethu: Our Time" exhibition, and we began a documentary film project of the same name. This ongoing reflection on Zulu-centered ceramic production seeks to place the voices of artists like the Nalas and Sithole at the center of discussions, a re-Zuluification of the discourse around Zulu ceramic expression.

Continuing in his philosophical reflections at mid career, Sithole speaks of exploring numerologies and abstract symbolism tied to Zulu iconography and his own biography. Looking to the future, Sithole has discussed the importance of maintaining his artistic independence, his love for townships and urban spaces in South Africa, and a desire to continue his outreach in the South African and international ceramic art worlds. Sithole is a clear leader in the South African art scene and has stated, "I would like to establish an academy for ceramists . . ."<sup>5</sup> His knowledge of both contemporary and historical Zulu identity, as well as his vibrant personality, make Sithole a perfect ambassador for the South African ceramics and a leader in his nation's arts.

*the author Dr. Elizabeth Perrill, associate professor at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, is an expert in Southern African art history, with specific research foci on ceramics and the economics of art markets in the late-20th and 21st centuries. Her exhibition, "Ukucwebezela: To Shine," toured in South Africa and the US from 2008–2012 and her book Zulu Pottery is part of a series on Zulu arts published by Print Matters Press in South Africa.*

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